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ABSTRACT

Because gifted girls so often fail to achieve their potential, they require specialized programming and counseling. Three factors in this longstanding pattern of underachievement and associated issues are: (1) biological (girls lack the innate ability to achieve); (2) environmental (aspects of the environment do not encourage female achievement); and (3) psychological (girls' personalities inhibit their achievement). Counseling, both formal and informal, can be critical in helping girls to recognize and address sex role stereotypes. Counseling can also serve as a positive force in the development of gifted girls' self concept and be instrumental in identifying mentors with whom girls can explore careers and lifestyles. Nine specific suggestions for teachers are offered. (Contains 46 references and resources.) (DB)

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"Where are the Wise Women?" A Reflection on the Issues Surrounding the Educational Experience of Gifted Girls

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The place: a school gymnasium
The time: the dress rehearsal for the Christmas pageant.
The scenario: A teacher is directing the children's activity and is arranging the gold, frankincense and myrrh. A little girl comes up to her teacher, points to the wise men, and asks, "Where are the wise women?"

Within the past two decades, the right of exceptional youth to educationally appropriate programming have been enshrined in law in several provinces. Among the pupils who have benefitted from these provisions are gifted pupils -- those educationally exceptional youth are gifted learners -- those pupils whose intellectual needs cause them to be placed among exceptional students.

A cursory glance through any current journal of or about the education of gifted pupils will re-enforce the fact that gifted pupils in no way form a homogeneous group. The literature reveals many "subgroups" of gifted pupils: the culturally-diverse gifted pupil; the pre-school gifted child; the physically-challenged gifted pupil; the gifted-learning disabled pupil; the underachieving gifted pupil -- and the gifted girl. The literature maintains that the needs of these subgroups differ significant from the gifted 'norm' as to require even more specialized considerations in identification and program development.

While many educators readily accept the notion of subgroups within the gifted population, some query the inclusion of gifted girls as a separate subgroup. Callahan (1980) justifies the existence of gifted girls as a subgroup with a convincing argument. Callahan suggests that unlike gifted boys, gifted girls do not grow up to be publicly recognized adults. Callahan cites the fact that the "overwhelming number of adults who are identified as gifted and creative are male." Or, in line with the opening anecdote, gifted boys grow up to be "wise men" while gifted girls do not grow up to be publicly recognized wise women.

Because gifted girls fail to achieve their potential, they require specialized programming and counselling.

Why do gifted girls fail to realize their potential? Three possible explanations are commonly identified as factors:

- biological: girls lack the innate ability to achieve.
- environmental: girls' environment does not encourage them to achieve.
- psychological: girls' personality inhibits their achievement.

The biological factors identified with women's lack of achievement are both historic and contemporary. These arguments perhaps reached their heyday in the debates surrounding women's

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admission to institutions of higher education at the turn of the century. Rosenberg (1984) demonstrated that well-known and well-published nineteenth century scholars such as Harvard Medical School's Dr. Edward Clarke, respected Philadelphia gynecologist Dr. Thomas A. Emmet and neurologist Dr. S. Weir Mitchell argued, in Dr. Clarke's words that because of their biological differences -- especially their intellectual differences --"the identical education of the two sexes is a crime before God and humanity that physiology protests against and that experience weeps over." More recently, the discussion of the "math gene" emanating from the research of Stanley & Benbow (1980) and the brain-mind research of Epstein (1974), Topfler (1981) and Sylwester (1982) have caused these biologically-based factors to surface once again. Simple put,these researchers argue that the biological construction of young women's brains prevent them from learning at the same rate and in the same mode as young men.

It is noteworthy that a century after the achievement of women's rightful place in higher education was achieved, the use of biologically-rooted arguments as a basis for the under-representation of achievement by women in the literature, is to say the least, problematic.

The environmental and psychological factors are closely linked. The Women's Movement of the Sixties and Seventies has caused educators, psychologists and sociologists to take a very close look at the definition of societal roles and subsequent gender issues. The family, the media, textbooks and even teachers' behaviours are all seen to contribute to the re-enforcement of behaviours among boys and girls. Callahan (1980) Thompson (1984), Blausberg (1978) Addison (1983), Kerr (1985) Murphy-Poole & Smyth (1986) and Callahan & Reis (1989) conclude that these environmental factors impact so significantly on the psychological development of bright and gifted girls that these factors do the most to underline the girls' potential. Verheyden-Hilliard (1983) reaches similar conclusions

> the gifted girl is -- as is every girl -- under terrific pressures to conform to societal expectations of 'appropriate' female behaviors. These stereotypic expectations are a terrible threat to the development of potential in any girl. For the gifted girl, the negative reaction is often worse because her giftedness may take her so far from stereotypic behaviors.

Researchers who have studied achieving gifted girls point to the roles of 'significant others' who aided the girls in meeting their goals through assisting their personality development. Developing a positive self-concept through appropriate attribution of success and failure; coping with expectations and the 'need' for perfection; developing personal and professional support systems -- all these strategies have been identified as critical factors contributing to the success of gifted girls (Addison, 1983).

While counselling is a critical component in aiding all gifted pupils to maximize their potential, researchers have

identified it as an especially critical one in the development of gifted girls (Wailed 1979). Counselling, like education, takes place in three learning environments -- the home, the school and the community. Counselling is both formal and informal; professional and amateur and can be organized around three cluster: academic, career and personal. Many people take on a counselling role in the lives of gifted girls: parents; peers; role models; neighbors; professional counsellors to name but a few. Researchers identify that these counsellors play many critical roles in the process of helping gifted girls to reach their full potential:

- aiding in the recognition and addressing of sex-role stereotypes;
- assisting as a positive force in the development of the gifted girl's self concept;
- helping identify mentors with whom to explore career and lifestyle (Higham & Navarre, 1984; Petersen, 1982).

To summarize this overview of the literature, one can make the following conclusions. Because of their under-representation in the public circles of achievement, and because of their specific and identifiable learning needs, gifted girls do constitute a subgroup of the gifted population. To enable gifted girls to reach their potential as achievers, educators should undertake a program of positive development.

These issues are real and very close to home. In a recent study of adolescent girls, the Canadian Teachers Federation (1990) reported that adolescent girls

> feel pressures and limitations boys are unlikely to experience and that they expressed a lot of resentment towards . . . the systems that seem to favour [their male peers].

Educators are beginning to recognize that the problems exist with the achievement of girls in general and gifted girls specifically. It is now time that educators take appropriate steps to attempt to ameliorate this situation.

WHAT CAN TEACHERS DO TO ASSIST GIFTED GIRLS
IN MAXIMIZING THEIR POTENTIAL

1. Ensure that courses and classes reflect both the male and female experience.

2. If females are missing from a subject, ask the question WHY?

3. Ensure that all pupils see that the combination of being bright, achieving and female is possible.

4. Use inclusive language. Check that the pronoun 'he' is not always used to mean everyone.

5. Observe how pupils are re-enforced and rewarded: are boys rewarded for intellectually challenging remarks and girls for 'appropriate and conforming' behaviours?

6. Discuss this issue with males and females. It is not a female only issue!

7. When nominating children for programs for bright/gifted pupils, look to ensure that the identification criteria is not biased against young female students.

8. Check with those providing guidance and counselling services to ensure that they are aware that gifted girls have special needs and that those needs are being addressed.

9. Advocate on behalf of gifted girls -- especially with their parents, their teachers, their classmates, and themselves!

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Selected Sources

A review of the literature on gifted girls contained in the ERIC/Exceptional Child Data Base is available through the Council for Exceptional Children member services.

The Winter 1989 Edition of the Journal for the Education of the Gifted (v.12 #2) is devoted to gifted girls. In addition to five articles, there is an annotated bibliography on Gifted Females. Back issues may be obtained through contacting the Journal for the Education of the Gifted, Council for Exceptional Children.

Among two of the most useful publications exclusively devoted to the topic of gifted girls are:

Addison, L.B. Gifted Girls: Inservice Resources Handbook. Bethesda, ML: The Equity Institute, 1983.

Kerr, B. Smart Girls, Gifted Women. Columbus: Ohio Psychology Publishing Company, 1985.

Several recent dissertations and graduate school exit papers have focused on the gifted girls and women. You may wish to consult the Register of Dissertations for a complete listing. Among those dissertations are:

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Spender, D. & E. Sarah (ed) Learning To Lose: Sexism and Education. London: The Women's Press, 1988.

Many teachers' federations, Ministries of Education, School Boards and Government Agencies have published support material on equity issues. Among them are:

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National Film Board. Women Breaking Through: A Cross-curriculum A-V resource Guide for Secondary Schools. Montreal: NFB, 1988.

Manitoba Social Studies Curriculum. Positive Images of Women. Manitoba Education and Training, 1989

Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation. OSSTF Status of Women Resource Manual. Toronto: OSSTF, 1989.

Science Council of Canada. Who Turns the Wheel? Ottawa: Science Council of Canada, 1981.

Other community-based resources which you may contact for additional resources:

Canadian Association of University Women. (The University Women's Clubs). Each club has a roster of women who can be called on for speakers etc.

Women's groups within professional societies e.g. Women's Interest Group in the Professional Engineering Society, Women Lawyers, Farm Women's Group, WISE (Women in Science and Engineering: many chapters across Canada)

Status of Women Committees within the school boards and the teacher federations

University and College Women's Study Programs, such as
Women's Studies in Education Centre
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
252 Bloor Street West
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